

**Establishing and Maintaining Classroom Rapport with Asia University's Junior college Students.**

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It is this writer's contention that the importance of the essential human element in teaching EFL (rapport) is frequently underestimated and understated. Classroom rapport, that warm, positive feeling of goodwill, trust, and mutual respect between the students and the teacher is the foundation upon which a positive, productive, and active learning process can take place in an EFL class. The reader is of course aware that rapport is important to establishing and maintaining a successful EFL class. This is especially true when the ELF class student population is comprised of Japanese female junior college students.

One may wonder why rapport is especially important when teaching an EFL class made up of the above mentioned student population. There are numerous reasons for this. They are young eighteen-year olds, just graduated from high school, and this is their first experience in any college class, much less an English language class taught by an American.

For most of the junior college students this is their first experience with an American teacher. Many of the students most likely have preconceived notions of what an American English teacher will be like. Therefore, they may or may not have a positive anticipation of their new teacher. Still other students will have no idea what to expect. The result is a student expectancy that is a mixture of eager anticipation, curiosity, anxiety, and studied indifference.

The second reason why rapport needs to be established little by little and continually from the first day of class is that the students are female and Japanese. They tend to be shy, passive, and reticent, or at least they are expected to play this role in relation to their teacher, their *sensei*. The teacher needs to understand and appreciate this in its cultural context but, he or she also needs to breach the shyness, reticence, and student role due to the nature and objectives of an integrated skills EFL class.

Another important factor is that people in general, Japanese particularly, and specifically Japanese female freshman college students, tend to be reluctant to vocalize when they do not feel comfortable or do not have a reasonable degree of trust and empathy for their fellow group members and the designated authority figure.

A simple process of deduction, therefore, makes it clear that it is incumbent on the teacher to show the students that they have reason to trust, respect, have empathy for, and can feel comfortable with their teacher, and his or her instruction and leadership. It is also imperative that the teacher help the students get acquainted as classmates so that they can feel comfortable with one another. In other words, the teacher is well recommended to foster a relaxed, yet academic classroom atmosphere, where learning can take place in an unobstructed fashion. The other side of the coin in regards to the question, why is 'rapport' especially important to teaching Japanese junior college students has to do with the teacher's need and motivation to be knowledgeable about the students so that he or

she can give his or her best in terms of EFL integrated skills and international viewpoint.

Therefore, the teacher, to some degree, naturally needs to get to know the students as human beings and young people who have particular English language and educational needs and motivations. Since the junior college students are exclusively or almost exclusively female, their need for and motivation to learn English is a bit different and unique from other student populations, including Asia University four-year university students, both male and female.

Logically, the next question to be answered is "how": How is the new American EFL teacher to effectively, and in a non-mechanical, natural fashion, establish and then maintain a high level of positive rapport with Asia University Junior College students? Basically, but with variation, in the same way that one would with other student populations.

The teacher's image, that is, how the teacher is perceived as the student's teacher, their American college English language *sensei*, is of the utmost importance.

The students most probably expect their new American teacher and the teacher's style of teaching to be different and unique from their Japanese teachers and professors. However, they will accept you and your different, and to them, unusual style of teaching if they perceive you as having a number of demonstrable characteristics. The most prominent of these are kindness, gentleness, patience, a sense of humor, fairness, firmness, and a sensitivity to them as students and their difficult task of acquiring and utilizing the English language,

especially in regards to expressing their own ideas and opinions.

The teacher's own enthusiasm and interest in the students as a class group and as individual class members and the lesson at hand is also most important to the rapport-building process.

Part and parcel of this bonding process is the manner in which the teacher speaks to the students. The students react very well to being addressed by their family name preceded by Miss. In turn, it is most appropriate for the students to address their teacher by his or her family name, preceded of course by the respective, Mr., Mrs., Miss, or Ms.

The students are college students, and not so far away from legal adulthood in Japan. The legal coming of age is twenty in Japan. Therefore, it is only reasonable and appropriate for the teacher to speak to the students with respect behooving young adult students. The student reaction will be positive. Conversely, if the lecturer/teacher talks down to the students and treats them like children, their reaction will be unfavorable and rapport building will be impeded.

The students expect and want their teacher to teach and lead them. Since they can't understand every word the teacher says, the teacher's tone of voice and body language, especially the facial expression and eye contact or lack of it, is very important to positive communication between teacher and student. Students seem to react most favorably to a firm, but gentle, and patient tone of voice with concurring body language, especially facial expression and degree of eye contact.

Like many other EFL students, most junior college students like individual attention. The teacher can do this by

circulating around the room when the students are engaged in pair practice, small group discussion, or written desk work. Students are likely to be formal and reticent with the teacher if the teacher is standing looking down at them because this is a superior-inferior formalized physical authority position.

The teacher can breach this distance and create an informal, friendly circumstance by bending or squatting down next to the student so that the teacher's head is at the same level or even lower than the students' head. The student gets the message that it is OK to relax and to interact with the teacher on a more open and friendly plane. This writer has found that circulating around the room and giving the students a little one-on-one attention in this way truly fosters a genuine and lasting teacher-student rapport.

Introduction and closure is important in Japanese culture. This notion can and should be applied in the junior college classroom. The way the teacher begins class and ends class at each meeting should be a kind of very brief ceremony.

Greeting the students and letting them know you are glad to be with them again is important to the start-up of the class, and praising the class a little at the end of each meeting is important for closure. Your body language, tone of voice, and a warm smile go a long way as part of maintaining rapport.

The teacher's appropriate and spontaneous smile of praise and verbal and non-verbal encouragement, is important to morale and confidence building for the students. This of course aids the rapport growth process. If such encouragement on the teacher's part is contrived, the students will recognize it as such and rapport development could be hindered.

As the reader is well aware, Japanese culture favors the group. As the reader is also aware, a college or university English class is a kind of group. In Japan, it is common for the entire group as a whole to be praised or chastised depending on the circumstance. The point is that the group is the focal point, not the individual group member.

It is therefore recommended that the teacher praise the whole class, or chastise, if warranted, as a group. If an individual student is praised in front of the group she will probably be embarrassed, even uncomfortable. Conversely, an individual student who is chastised in front of the whole class will loose face and feel humiliated, and the rest of the class members will feel badly. Such a situation is of course not desirable to fostering rapport.

The teacher can, however, praise the students individually when they are working in pairs or small group. In such a case there is only one to three other classmates immediately present and individual students of course appreciate a good word from their teacher.

Teacher-student rapport is of the utmost importance; however, student-student rapport is important too. Together, these two major components of interactive rapport comprise positive classroom chemistry which is, of course, highly desired.

In large measure, the students will do their own rapport building in and outside of class. The teacher can assist them in this process in the course of implementing teaching technique. Pair practice and small group discussion provides an excellent opportunity for the students to get acquainted, to

form friendship, and to build rapport. In other words, if the teacher sets up a few conducive circumstances, the students will do their best toward establishing and building their own rapport and positive group chemistry.

There is a way of cementing rapport that seems quite effective, and which is satisfying for both teacher and students. It is simply taking a little time to greet and or to have a brief friendly chat with your students when you see them at break time or just around campus. Some of the students will be shy about this, others not at all. Often the students will greet you first. The teacher is, of course, expected to return the greeting. Furthermore, the students are generally most pleased if you attempt to engage them in simple daily conversation in Japanese or English. Some of them will be eager to show off their English to you, and even the truly shy students will usually make a brave attempt to do so. A patient smile from the teacher will encourage the students, and smiles and laughter from the students will encourage the teacher. So, a pleasant interaction is had by all, and teacher-student rapport is furthered.

In conclusion, it should be reiterated that the importance and value of strong positive rapport between the teacher and the junior college students and between the students as individual members of the class group must not be underestimated. There is no doubt in this writer's mind that such strong, positive, and warm rapport is the foundation for an active, enthusiastic and productive integrated skills EFL class.